

Monthly meetings

04 November 2018

Important Highlights about the Prayer Life

I mentioned before that there are some essential foundations in the spiritual life which I want to draw the attention to. I repeat that what I will mention in this respect is not all the foundations of the spiritual life; I only want to focus on some of them which I believe are of special importance for us at this stage and in the context of the challenges that surround us.

I previously mentioned that the foundations that I am referring to and which I want to talk about are: prayer, watchfulness, faith, and unity.

Today, I will start by talking about prayer.

The topic of prayer is not new to any of us.

Yet, as I said last month, we want to enter into the depths of the spiritual life and not remain on the surface, fluctuating with the challenges and the change of circumstances. Instead, we should be steadfast or rather be transformed and transform: transform the circumstances; transform those around us; and work with God according to His mind and for His glory.

Therefore, my message about prayer today will take a different approach and a new dimension. This would make us enter into the level of maturity which we should be at, after all these years; so that, God may entrust us with His promises and the work of His Kingdom; and hence, send us forth strengthened by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Thus, we would work with the Lord and see His glory.

The Psalmist says:

'My soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory' (Psalm 63: 1, 2).

Aren't we now in a dry land where there is no water? The inner spiritual dryness and the absence of the living water of the Holy Spirit, which is continually poured on the worshipping soul, cause us to groan and long to see His power and glory.

It is true that we still hear about God's great work through His faithful servants here and there. However, we are at a time that requires a lot of discernment so that we may not be deceived. There are some big manifestations in certain ministries; yet, they might include some fleshly enthusiasm or falseness even if this was unintentional. There are some other manifestations of the work of the Lord with His faithful servants which are genuine; and these encourage our faith so that we may move forward and refrain from the negativity or superficiality.

This leads us to talk about some important highlights regarding prayer; and these are:

1. What is the active & effective prayer?
2. What is its ultimate goal or purpose?

Let us start with the first question:

1. What is the active & effective prayer?

To answer this question, I want to refer to two aspects in the prayer life:

- A. Prayer and the satisfaction with God
- B. The transforming prayer

A. Prayer and the satisfaction with God

Don't we know that the Psalms are the spiritual manna for the new Israel, that is, the believers and the faithful, as was the old manna fullness for the children of Israel throughout their sojourning in the wilderness!

Therefore, we are in need of spiritual food that would fill us while we are in the wilderness of this world.

O' Lord, teach us how to pray so that our inner depth may be nourished and our hidden hunger –which often diverts us to vain matters –may be filled and satisfied.

O' Lord, satisfy us with the mysteries of Your Kingdom because You promised saying: *'it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven'* (Matthew 13: 11).

Yes, Lord, our true inner satisfaction is with Your divine mysteries; when we eat them and get to know them; and hence, love this food and continually long for it, seek it, ask for it; it fills us; and then we ask for it again; and cannot live without it.

Being filled with You and with the mysteries of Your Kingdom lifts our soul and our whole being upwards; and so, we seek those things which are above and refrain from our sad and lamentable attraction to the things of the earth, the things that are down below.

Don't we remember the words of the Scriptures:

'If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth' (Colossians 3: 1, 2).

Therefore, one of the important aspects of prayer is to turn my being to the things that are above; otherwise, I will not have risen with Christ. It will be as though I made His great work unfruitful in my life and I do not experience anything of the power of His resurrection.

When asked by some of his disciples about how he sees the state of the world today, an elder of the holy mountain of Athos said:

‘The fallen man bows down only to pleasure; and how to increase pleasure through hunger.

Therefore, the secular gods and the gods of the world today that desire to devour you –and which include within them the television, the internet, the newspapers, the advertisement companies, etc. –dedicate their time to reproduce hunger.

Do not marvel; the body of most of us today contains excessive fat which it does not need.

This is only one of the results. Yet, the strongest is the constant hunger for sex & sexual pleasure. Sex is the greatest pleasure and it has the most effect; it is what the body groans for all the time. But not only this; sex is not like the food that gives pleasure to the body, but it also gives pleasure to the soul.’

The elder continues saying:

‘The body and soul of the human being longs for sex and for being united with the other. The world makes him constantly hungry, never having enough of this greatest pleasure.

But the monks & nuns who are God’s message that is put on a mountain, say this message to the human being who is constantly hungry; and that is:

Hunger is a state that can be broken & overcome by being filled and satisfied with God. The devil, the biggest hungry enemy who walks about seeking whom he may devour to fill his hunger, we can resist him and become filled by the Holy Spirit who is the eternal satisfaction for our soul and body; and with Him, we will never hunger or thirst –as Jesus said.

Let us listen to the words of Jesus in the gospel where He says:

'I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst' (John 6: 35).

'I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever' (John 6: 51).

'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7: 37, 38).

'And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely' (Revelation 22: 17).

The other aspect of the life of prayer is:

B. The Transforming Prayer:

In his second epistle to the Corinthians, Apostle Paul writes:

'But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord' (2Corinthians 3: 18).

It is clear here that prayer transforms from one state to another, as long as prayer is seeing and beholding the face of the Lord, that is, having a true encounter with Him.

Therefore, prayer should be described as *transforming*.

But, how?

Prayer is not a mere spiritual practice; but it is a *spiritual work*, an action.

It is the prayer that attracts for me divine energy from above, a divine energy that is poured in me and that prays in me. This can be in quietness without any specific manifestations.

This is my dire need because my human energy fails me; it naturally does not like prayer. My weak will, as a result of the hidden fall, pulls me towards rest, finding false or deceitful excuses like feeling ill or being unable –though this will which seems weak can immediately become active and energetic when there is any physical activity that serves earthly purposes.

However, the divine energy lifts me upwards; it recollects my distracted mind, it revives my deadened heart; and it transforms me to another person, a man of God!

The transforming prayer also sanctifies the time, making it a redeemed time. It protects the day from the hidden hand of the enemy. It is the prayer that restores what has been lost and restores the years that the swarming locust has eaten (Joel 2: 25). Thus, my days will no longer be barren; my times no longer wasted without divine control; my feet no longer tied up or bound; and my life no longer without fruit for the glory of God.

It is written:

'Being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God' (Philippians 1: 11).

'that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God' (Colossians 1: 10).

Therefore, it is the prayer that liberates and loosens the bonds; it makes the Lord the only Master of my life.

Wasn't this the groaning of the prophet in the old days when he saw the people hindered because of their enemies that surrounded them! He cried out saying: *'O Lord our God, masters besides You have had dominion over us'* (Isaiah 26: 13).

Not only this, but also when we give prayer its full scope & opportunity, that is, by being spiritually committed to the prayer time daily and pouring ourselves and revealing our inner depth in the presence of God, ***the work of prayer extends to our inner depth, purifying the heart and the conscience.***

This is of great importance for the following reasons:

When the heart is purified, the person enters into a deeper fellowship with God and it will be as though he is continually seeing God with the eyes of his heart. This will be a source of enormous help, protecting the person from making mistakes and from the plans of the evil one. Let us listen to the words of the Scriptures where it is written:

'I have set the Lord always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved' (Psalm 16: 8).

On the other hand, the purification of the conscience makes the soul very sensitive spiritually and makes the human motivations upright and not

crooked; and so, the person will be the same from outside as he is inside. It is an amazing purity that draws the person nearer to God. Didn't Jesus say in the Sermon on the mount in the beatitudes: *'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'* (Matthew 5: 8).

Also, in the epistle to the Hebrews we read: *'how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?'* (Hebrews 9: 14).

And finally, ***the transforming prayer is that which is not constrained in the things related to the person himself***, even if this was related to his spiritual life. But, it is the prayer whose purpose is to know what is in God's heart; so that, the person may give himself to the matters of God's Kingdom, whether by serving, interceding, or sacrificing himself so that it would be accounted as a sacrifice and a sweet aroma to the Lord –as Apostle Paul says: *'For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter'* (Romans 8: 36).

Now we come to the second question related to the life of prayer and that is:

2. What is the ultimate purpose of prayer?

Prayer is a school where one continually discovers himself and the Person of God.

Prayer continually reveals to me the Lord whom I worship, love, and serve –whether during the times of joy and praise or the times of suffering and pouring my complaint before Him.

It reveals to me the Lord if I am steadfast in my prayers, realising that prayer does not depend on my state or circumstances; but, it is a liturgical ministry which I offer in heaven with the angels, even when the days are heavy or dull and monotonous.

It is a divine commission to the true believer, but, it is a commissioning which depends on my love for the Lord, my longing for Him, and my realisation that my new life in Christ requires this fellowship with Him through prayer.

Based on this understanding, I will start to perceive what I have read in the Scriptures about the Person of God, His character, and His ways. This is what will transform me into His image and qualify me to be entrusted by Him with His Kingdom work in true companionship with Him. This alone gives satisfaction for the human being and gives a meaning and purpose for life, as the Psalmist says: *'In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore'* (Psalm 16: 11).

As an example, but not exclusively, I want to highlight some of the features & characteristics that a worshiper can discover regarding his knowledge of the Lord, when he has given attention to and established a prayer life.

The first feature that I wish to refer to in this respect is:

1. The Lord is Good and is a Friend

The Lord desires to enter into friendship with man:

In the beginning of creation, we see how He conversed with Adam as a friend of Him, showing him all the creatures and even asking him to name them (Genesis 2: 19, 20).

We also read that the Lord walked in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3: 8). He made the Garden specifically for His beloved Adam and was continually present with him. According to the original language, we understand from the first three chapters of the book of Genesis that the Garden had become the mutual and permanent place of presence between Adam and God. The book of Proverbs reminds us of this relationship where it is written: *'my delight was with the sons of men'* (Proverbs 8: 31b).

We also read the following words when the Lord visited Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah:

'And the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?' (Genesis 18: 17, 18).

How sweet is this fellowship! This kind of fellowship encouraged Abraham to reason with God regarding Sodom and Gomorrah, as written in Genesis 18: 23 – 33.

We continue to read about this feature regarding all God's relationships with the men of God:

Moses had a mystical fellowship with God, which we do not know much about. He entered with God in the cloud of the divine glory for 40 days and returned for another 40 days, until the glory of God was imprinted on the face of Moses and his face shone (Exodus 34: 39).

David did not cease to sing to the Lord with his Psalms, telling us: *'Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good'* (Psalm 34: 8).

Jeremiah also tells us the following words regarding his experience with the Lord:

“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I hope in Him!” The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him (Lamentations 3: 24, 25).

This is the Lord our God! The Lord is Good and is a Friend!

2. The Lord my God

The men of God loved to call the Lord by saying ‘*the Lord, my God*’. We read this term repeatedly in the Scriptures.

Here are some references:

- Moses

‘The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; my father’s God, and I will exalt Him’ (Exodus 15: 2).

‘Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess’ (Deuteronomy 4: 5).

- Joshua

‘But I wholly followed the Lord my God’ (Joshua 14: 8).

- Solomon (he learned from his father, David)

‘Now, O Lord my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in’ (1kings 3: 7).

- David in the Psalms

‘Consider and hear me, O Lord my God’ (Psalm 13: 3).

'Many, O Lord my God, are Your wonderful works which You have done; and Your thoughts toward us cannot be recounted to You in order; if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered' (Psalm 40: 5).

- Isaiah

Then I said, 'I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain; yet surely my just reward is with the Lord, and my work with my God' (Isaiah 49: 4).

- Jeremiah

'Restore me, and I will return, for You are the Lord my God' (Jeremiah 31: 18b).

But why do the men of God insist on calling God 'the Lord my God' or 'my God'?

This is because each one of them experienced very special and very personal dealings with God; as if God was for him alone and as if there was no one else around them.

This matter is of special importance because it reveals a very personal and distinct relationship between man and God. This relationship manifests & reflects certain dealings of God with the person, different from the normal things which are God's attributes like love and care, etc. Yet, these are dealings that touch the very core of the person in distinct areas & matters, that is, matters that are unique to that person which no one knows apart from the Lord. These special personal dealings of the Lord remain in the person's memory and they are never erased because they represent special landmarks in one's life journey, without which the person loses his

personal identity and is unable to discover the purpose of being created and the plan of his personal calling in this life.

3. The Lord, the Saviour, and the mysteries of His salvation

All what we have mentioned so far were experiences of the men of God in the Old Testament.

This was a preparation for the revelation of the Saviour in the New Testament, who no longer desired to only deal with man from the outside but to dwell in him, fill his whole being, and transform him into His image; so that, the believer may become a small Christ, testifying to the grace of God and causing a positive influence wherever he goes or speaks. This is the purpose of God in our life. We are born in this world for a mission & a message; and this is what distinguishes our life and give it a purpose, meaning, and satisfaction.

It is written: *Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; 'For Yah, the Lord, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation'* (Isaiah 12: 2).

This salvation was described as *'so great a salvation'* (Hebrews 2: 3), that is, a very great salvation. It is in fact multiple wells that comprise rich mysteries and manifold graces. We are called to ceaselessly receive from these wells so that our spiritual life may not become dry and monotonous. It is written: *'Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation'* (Isaiah 12: 3).

We thus start to know the Lord in a new way. He is our Saviour and the master of our life; He is the source of divine power which is not of the flesh; He is the faithful Lord upon whom we lean and who does not fail anyone nor put to shame those who wait for Him.

He is the Lord whom the Psalmist praised saying:

'I will love You, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold' (Psalm 18: 1, 2).

4. The Lord the wondrous and marvellous

Let us hear how the books of Scripture present Him to us as the wondrous Lord:

- His name is wonderful

'For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9: 6).

- His plans are marvellous

'This was the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes' (Psalm 118: 23).

- His testimonies are wonderful

'Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them' (Psalm 119: 129).

- His works are marvellous

'Marvellous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well' (Psalm 139: 14b).

Blessed be the Lord, for He has shown me His marvellous kindness in a strong city' (Psalm 31: 21).

'Great and marvellous are Your works, Lord God Almighty' (Revelation 15: 3).

- His ways are marvellous and wonderful

'This also comes from the Lord of hosts, who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in guidance' (Isaiah 28: 29).

- His doings are wondrous

'I thought it good to declare the signs and wonders that the Most High God has worked for me. How great are His signs, and how mighty His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion is from generation to generation' (Daniel 4: 2, 3).

And finally, I say:

This wondrous God has called us to His marvellous light, as Apostle Peter says:

'...that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light' (1Peter 2: 9b).

Therefore, we have a responsibility to proclaim and declare the wondrous works of the Lord. The Psalmist draws our attention to this when he says:

'O God, You have taught me from my youth; and to this day I declare Your wondrous works' (Psalm 71: 17).

Glory be to God forever